

From *Browning* to *Cake Soap*: Popular Debates on Skin Bleaching in the Jamaican Dancehall ¹

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Abstract

This paper explores the cultural debates on skin lightening or 'bleaching' in Jamaica through the lens of popular music, in particular dancehall music culture. Social debates on skin lightening in Jamaican often identify this practice as a form of mental slippage, and as a solely epidermal manifestation of low self-esteem generated by white supremacist ideals that negate the black, African self. Yet, progressive dancehall debates and popular slang suggest that a progressive move towards contemporary manifestations of skin bleaching are associated with contemporary modes of fashion and ungendered rites of beauty. As such, the paper draws on the lyrics and slang of dancehall artistes and delineates a path from Buju Banton's *Browning* to Vybz Kartel's *Cake Soap* as it attempts to flesh out the overlapping cultural debates that surround skin bleaching.

Keywords: dancehall, Jamaica, cake soap, skin bleaching, Browning

Introduction

This paper builds on earlier work (Hope 2009) to explore the cultural debates on the pervasive issue of skin ‘bleaching’ as a component of the quarrels with lighter skin colour vs. darker skin colour in Jamaica. In this instance, the discussion focuses particularly on popular dancehall music culture which has explicitly engaged this debate since the turn of the 1990s. As such, this paper draws on the lyrics and slang of select dancehall artistes to flesh out the overlapping cultural themes that colour this debate from the 1990s to the present.

Various studies have examined and discussed the underlying rationale for the Jamaican imperative towards lighter skin colour (Kerr 1952, Henriques 1953, Miller 2001, Charles 2003, 2007 and 2009, Hope 2009, Niaah 2009) which for many fuels skin bleaching in Jamaica. In overturning the continued parlaying of the singular application of the black self-hate thesis as the rationale for skin bleaching, Charles concluded that “the bleaching group certainly does not suffer from self-hate. However, they have been miseducated into believing that the only standard of beauty is the one defined by European ideals” (Charles 2003:726). Charles (2007:4) also highlighted a variety of reasons why skin bleachers engage in the practice, including: - to remove facial blemishes, to look beautiful, to attract a partner, to make their faces “cool”² and to feel good. Here, Charles (2007) concluded that “the interaction of societal institutions has created the light skin hegemonic representation that says light skin is superior to dark skin” (2007:15)... and this “light skin hegemonic representation guides the behavior of the study participants who altered their Black physicality” (2007:15). Accordingly, the persistent blanketing of manifestations of skin lightening/bleaching, as reflective of low self-esteem or whitewashing of the mind of mainly poor urban women demands additional interrogation and analysis beyond the social and psychological (Barnes 2006:114). The representations of light-skinned (or brown) Jamaicans who also bleach their skin create a paradox when these discussions are grounded solely on the notion that darker-skinned individuals engage in this practice in order to become lighter and thus fit into the ideals of lightness that pervade the society.

Evidence presented from various studies including Miller’s work in the 1960s and 1970s (see Miller 2001; Charles 2003; 2007; 2009; and Hope 2009; 2010) suggest that multiple factors provide the social and cultural impetus towards skin bleaching in Jamaica and these factors should be taken into account if meaningful strategies are to be created and employed to counteract the trend

towards skin bleaching. This is particularly so as state-driven public education programs such as the Ministry of Health's anti-bleaching clampdown in 1999³ and their "Don't Kill the Skin" campaign" in 2007, ostensibly target the biological and medical aspects of skin bleaching and target and profile Jamaican 'bleachers' as persons at the lower reaches of the social and economic strata. In this regard, Brown-Glaude's (2007) examination of public newspaper discussions around the issue highlights the propensity to medicalize the debates around skin bleaching in Jamaica and suggests that the relationship between discourse and power is evident.

Locating the *Browning*: Imperatives towards Skin Bleaching in Jamaica

The conflation of skin colour with power, a pervasive shadism, remains a social and cultural legacy of Jamaica's slavery and colonial history, with lighter skin (identified as 'brown' in Jamaica) still perceived as positive and ideal. However, even while race and/or colour play critical role in defining status and personhood, the discontinuities based on class far supersede those that may be predicated on race and/or colour. Accordingly, race and skin colour are still correlated with class, as the greater percentage of ethnic minorities (Whites, Jews, and light- coloured Chinese and Lebanese) either own property or are located at the highest levels of Jamaica's class/status hierarchy in a society where more than 97% of the society is Afro-Jamaican or black. The greater percentage of Jamaica's very poor and chronically under-employed and/or unemployed is darker-skinned or black (Hope 2006).

The socio-cultural value systems encode and transmit this notion of the value of lighter skin over darker skin and lighter skin as a positive ideal, and this is correlated with other phenotypical factors, including length and texture of hair for women, the shape of the nose and a generally close approximation to Eurocentric standards of beauty. A Jamaican woman with long, smooth, flowing hair and a 'straight' or pointy nose is closer to the model of feminine beauty that is idealized, than one who sports natural, kinky or unprocessed hair and who may have a flat, pug nose (Miller 2001). As such, the elevation of the "Brown" or mulatto woman as the ideal category of feminine beauty (Mohammed 2000, Miller 2001) is tied to this colourism and undergirded by the discursive process via which the brown or mulatto class gained hegemonic ascendancy in Jamaica. The primary inheritors of the plantation legacies of their European grandparents and forefathers, the "Brown" Jamaican's inheritance meant real social and

economic power and the image of a “Brown man” or “Brown woman”,⁴ for many post-independent, working class Jamaicans was less about skin colour and more about social status. “Brown” was a prestigious birthright, a class identity associated with high levels of cultural, social and economic capital that included social background, high levels of social and economic prestige and political and economic power. Thus, the “Brown woman” or “Browning” emerged as the ideal standard of feminine beauty in a country that had once been dominated by a white value system that gave dominance to whitened images as ideal notions of self. As a result, the term “Browning” defined a light-skinned female with African physicality who acts as a Eurocentric substitute and a social ideal for all ethnic groups in Jamaica (Miller 2001). The elevation of this model of femininity continues to be routinely played out on the stage of socially accepted presentations of Jamaican beauty including the annual staging of the Miss Jamaica (World) and Miss Jamaica Universe beauty contests even with the occasional crowning of a darker-skinned Jamaican woman as the winner of these contests.⁵ The competing and paradoxical dualities of this simultaneously Afro/Euro notion of ideals of beauty undergird the ambivalence of many in contemporary Jamaica, who strive to lighten their skin using various methods, some harmful, others not.⁶

Based on earlier work in the dancehall (see Hope 2006, 2009, 2010) this paper focuses on Jamaican popular dancehall music and culture which remains a reservoir of Jamaican culture, particularly of the underclasses. Dancehall music and culture’s signposts suggest that skin bleaching has moved beyond being solely a representation or display of patent Eurocentrism and a rejection of Afrocentrism. The following discussions delineate a select path through dancehall’s engagement with issues of skin colour and skin bleaching from Buju Banton’s *Browning* to Vybz Kartel’s *Cake Soap*.

Highlighting the *Browning*: Dancehall Music and Culture’s Early Debates

The first clearly recorded instance of dancehall music’s debates on the problematic social issues of skin colour and skin bleaching was with Buju Banton’s performance⁷ of the song, *Love Mi Browning*, in 1990:

*Mi love mi car, mi love mi bike,
Mi love mi money an ting
But most of all mi love mi Browning*

[I love my car, I love my bike]
[I love my money and things]
[But most of all I love my Browning]

Love Mi Browning, for many, was linked to the historical and problematic specificities of racial identity that had dogged Jamaica since slavery and beyond. The song thus confirmed the problematic notion that brown (or lighter skin) was positive and elevated over and above dark skin (read: dark-skinned women). However, the songwriter's fantasy, articulated and owned by Buju Banton, was also one of social and economic elevation, and highlighted the ideals of the masculine ethos that coloured the lives of many working class and inner city men at that time in early 1990s Jamaica – a car, a bike, money, “*an thing*” - and a “*Browning*”. The Browning represents the pervasive female body upon and through which many of dancehall's discussions on heterosexual masculinity are based. The various items acknowledged by Buju Banton, including the catch-all “*an thing*” identified, at that time in early 1990s, the predominant social and economic factors that Jamaica's hegemonic and gendered impulses suggested as having the power to bestow status and personhood on marginalized Jamaican men. Elevating the woman as “*Browning*” in both the title and the hook of the refrain, “*but most of all mi love mi Browning*,” suggested that the role of woman, particularly the “*Browning*,” was of utmost importance to the ascendancy of Jamaican masculinities. Two decades later, this has changed little. In the milieu of the 1990s Buju's hastily coined rejoinder *Love Black Woman* was in direct response to the public outcry against *Love Mi Browning*. *Love Black Woman* played into the explicit social cries that claimed “equality” for darker-skinned women by identifying the female and varying its references to the positive value of darker skin colour (as opposed to lighter skin) in its patent attempt to celebrate the beauty of dark-skinned women.⁸

Nonetheless, *Love Mi Browning* remains historicized as the dancehall anthem that reified light skin/light skinned women in Jamaica. *Browning* and Buju Banton have been and continue to be charged with “deliberately” spurring on the “subsequent” bleaching epidemic that purportedly followed in its wake in the 1990, even with Jamaica's longstanding impetus towards lighter skin and the use of bleaching creams by many Jamaicans (particularly women) since the 19th century. Yet, as Professor Errol Miller (1999) notes in his Gleaner newspaper piece “When Buju and other DJs talk about the 'browning', they are not embracing whiteness, but the skin colour of the composite ideal of beauty that has evolved in the Jamaican society over time.”

As an important link in the subsequent debates around *Browning* within and beyond the dancehall, Nardo Ranks' *Dem a Bleach* (1992) documents the post-Browning public and media debates on the issue of bleaching. For Ranks and many 'non-bleaching' Jamaicans, Buju Banton's *Love Mi Browning* reintroduced notions of the skin colour hierarchy in Jamaica and spurred on the bleaching epidemic of that era⁹ and he introduces this pointedly in the song:

*Bwoy tru Buju Banton tell di girl dem bout Browning
All a di girl dem a run go a shop go bleach
Cause dem want brown skin*

[Oh boy, because Buju Banton told the girls about "Browning"]
[All of the girls have run to the shop to purchase bleaching products]
[Because they want brown skin]

The title and chorus "*Dem a bleach*" implied a steady flow of women at the rivers of bleaching:

Chorus

*Dem a bleach dem a bleach out dem skin
Dem a bleach fi look like a Browning
Dem a bleach dem a bleach out dem skin
Dem a bleach fi look like a Browning*

[They are bleaching, they are bleaching out their skin]
[They are bleaching to look like a Browning]
[They are bleaching they are bleaching out their skin]
[They are bleaching to look like a Browning]

*Gyal mi honour you cause yuh nuh bleach out yuh skin
You nuh use no chemical fi look like a Browning*

[Girl, you are honoured because you have not bleached out your skin]
[You have not used any chemical to try and look like a Browning]

Repeat

In Verse 1 of *Dem a Bleach*, Ranks cements the notion that Jamaican women were bleaching "*tru Buju Banton tell dem bout di Browning*" ("*because Buju Banton told them about the Browning*):

Verse 1

*Ninety percent of the girls dem join di system
Every girl nowadays dem want brown skin
Tru Buju Banton tell dem bout di Browning
Every gyal say dem want di colour of di pumpkin
So dem run gone ah shop ah fi go buy brown skin*

[Ninety percent of the girls have joined this system]
[Every girl today wants brown skin]
[Because Buju Banton told them about the Browning]
[Every girl says that they want to have the colour of the pumpkin]
[So, they run to the shop to go and buy brown skin]

Rank's suggestion that women can "*run go ah shop go buy brown skin*" is a consistent thread running throughout many songs in this vein since the 1990s and beyond.

A subsequent and related point of departure in dancehall's debates on skin bleaching highlights dancehalls dualities that remain its own paradox in its use of various methods, including ridicule and derision to discuss skin bleaching. In *Monkeys* (1998), Mr. Lex (formerly Lexxus) presents skin bleaching as a frivolous, feminine activity, and insists that women who undergo this transformation should be ridiculed and likened to monkeys:

*Who let those monkeys out?
All di gyal dem wid dem face bleach out
When yu see dem yuh fi shout:
OOOOH OOOH AAH AAH AAAAAH
Monkey dat, OOOOH OOOH AAH AAH AAAAAH*

[Who let those monkeys out?]
[All the girls with their bleached-out faces]
[When you see them you must shout:
[OOOOH OOOH AAH AAH AAAAAH]
[That's a monkey[OOOOH OOOH AAH AAH AAAAAH]

Monkeys updates Nardo Ranks rather mild chastising of bleachers, with outright derision and scorn. This song displayed the dominant themes from the wider society at the end of the 1990s, and highlights a persistent thread in the skin

bleaching debate, where bleachers are often likened to monkeys, duppies (ghosts), and clowns by their peers and subject to ridicule and scorn.

Notwithstanding, at the turn of the millennium, the practice of skin bleaching began to gain some level of social and cultural visibility in Jamaica. This marked the development of songs that explicitly supported engagement in skin bleaching as a vital constituent of Jamaica's underclasses and dancehall's engagement with urban, working class attempts to aesthetically invert the social and cultural hierarchies and simultaneously subvert notions of prestige and fashion. Captain Barkey's *Bleach On* (2001) did not gain much popularity nor did it spark the ire of media commentators and social critics. I argue that this was so because Captain Barkey was, and is not, among the higher echelons of popular dancehall artistes whose songs routinely make the airwaves and fall into the cadre of those identified as popular. Therefore, *Bleach On* would be invisible to the socially and culturally distanced media commentators and critics who target only the most visible and accessible facets of dancehall culture for their superficial debates. Yet, in 2001, Barkey's *Bleach On*, explicitly encourages women to engage in a range of image-altering practices if they result in enhanced and accepted modes of beauty that fit in with the standards set by the wider society. It is noteworthy for the arguments made herein, that Barkey's emphasis on skin bleaching, parallels the explosion of bleaching that swept Jamaica at the turn of the millennium and encodes the growing ambivalence to the pervasive practice:

*Go deh mi gyal, go deh mi gyal go deh mi gyal go deh mi gyal go deh mi
gyaaaaal
Hey!*

*Settle yah mi gyal because you come fi mash it up
Han inna di air cause yuh nuh chop up chop up
Rail up mi gyal you nuh ole an mash up
Woooooeee!
Mi dainty gyal dem*

*If you a bleach an bleaching fit you
Bleach on Bleach on
Yuh have you false hair and false hair fit you
Weave on Weave on
If you a lead and leading fit you
Lead on Lead on
You tek di pace an speeding fit you*

Speed on Speed on

*Fi all di gyal dem whe a bleach an know say bleaching fit you
Nuh badda go falla nobaddy because you know say Barkey with you
Ah you go buy you tings so none ah dem cyan come box an kick you
An when yuh a bleach it never burn yuh up it never sick you
Dem say you nuh look good but a trick dem a try fi trick you trick you
Dat nah go stop you man from hug you up and kiss you
Dem better get it inna dem head that you ahead Alicia*

[Go on my girl, go on my girl...(repeat)]
[Hey!]

[Settle down my girl because you have come to take over]
[Wave your hands in the air because your skin is not filled with cuts]
[Jump up and scream my girl because you are not old and broken down]
[Woeeeeiiiiiee]
[My dainty girls]

[If you are bleaching and bleaching suits you]
[Keep on bleaching, keep on bleaching]
[If you are wearing hair extensions and hair extensions suit you]
[Keep on weaving, keep on weaving]
[If you are in the lead and leading suits you]
[Keep on leading, keep on leading]
[If you have taken the pace and speeding suits you]
[Keep on speeding, keep on speeding]

[For all the girls who are bleaching and know that it suits you]
[Don't follow anyone because you know that Captain Barkey supports
you]
[You bought your things so no one can slap you in your face or kick you]
[And when you bleached it did not burn you and it did not make you sick]
[They say that you do not look good but they are trying to trick you, trick
you]
[That will not stop your man from hugging and kissing you]
[They had better get it into their heads that you are a success, Alicia]

In the foregoing lyrics of *Bleach On*, Captain Barkey takes a radical turn that presages dancehall artistes' Lisa Hype and Vybz Kartel's transgressive and

deliberate move towards lyrical and behavioral engagement with skin bleaching, almost a decade later. Here, Barkey projects bleaching as a positive activity, particularly, when it “*fit you*”, that is, when it is complimentary and therefore enhances your image and beauty, and pointedly links bleaching to other feminine aesthetic practices such as hair extensions (false hair) when he entreats ‘his girls’ to “*Weave on Weave on*”, if the use of these cosmetic props results in their aesthetic enhancement. The pervasive notions of capitalist property and ownership that have become part and parcel of Jamaican life since the end of the 1990s are intertwined with these entreaties where Barkey notes that your personal expenditure (“*Ah you go buy yuh tings*”/you went and bought your things) suggest ownership and control over the utilization of these aesthetic artifices, regardless of public condemnation of the practice (“*So nobaddy cyan come box and kick you*”/so no one can box and kick you).¹⁰ Affirmation by their partner is also essential, and Barkey underscores not just his support for female bleachers, but also the fact that the partner in the mix “*nah go stop hug up and kiss*” the woman who bleaches.¹¹

One common thread running throughout the foregoing lyrical debates from within dancehall towards the end of the 1990s is that skin bleaching is a feminine activity. Buju Banton’s *Browning* and *Love Black Woman* specifically target the female and Nardo Rank’s *Dem a Bleach*, Mr. Lex’s *Monkeys and Captain Barkey’s Bleach On* all operate along the same trend. The subsequent transition in the gender identity of bleachers is first documented in dancehall’s debates towards the end of the 1990s.

Badman nuh Dress Like Girl – Expressions of Male Bleaching in Dancehall Culture

Harry Toddler’s *Badman nuh Dress Like Girl* of the late 1990s is among the first set of popular dancehall songs that directly pointed to a range of female aesthetics, including skin bleaching, that were being appropriated by men:

Chorus

*Badman nuh dress like girl,
Wi nuh bore nose and win uh bleach face an win uh wear drops curls,
An some freaky freaky boys fi stop dress like girls*

Verse 1

*Mi look bush and bashy
Inna mi Moschino and mi latest Vasace
We nuh bore nose an wi nuh too Jheri
Natural as mi born a so mi gal dem tell mi
Hey yow,
Some bwoy get drawn out
Face guh bleach out, deh pan a wrong route
Look like a gal when him a guh out
Dem mistake him tek him fi gal inna crowd*

Scare Dem nuh dress like girl

Chorus

[Real Badmen do not dress like girls/women]
[We do not pierce our noses, nor do we bleach/lighten our faces]
[And we do not wear our hair in (drop) curls (like a female)]
[And some freaky boys/men should stop dressing like girls/women]

Verse 1

[I look well-dressed and fabulous]
[In my Moschino and latest Versace (outfits)]
[We do not pierce our noses and we do not really indulge in Jherri curls]
[I am as natural as the day I was born, this is what the girls/women tell me]
[Hey, Yow]
[Some boys have been pulled into controversy]
[Their faces have been bleached out and they are on the wrong route]
[He looks like a girl when he is going out]
[They/people (will) mistakenly identify him as a girl in a crowd]
[Scare Dem Crew¹² does not dress like girls]

The foregoing themes of male appropriation of feminine modes of aesthetic and costuming choices in *Badman Nuh Dress* explicitly denotes these practices as problematic and downright unmanly, with the hardcore and ‘natural’ Badman identified as the epitome of male identity as is normative in dancehall culture. Bounty Killer’s treatise, *Caan Believe Mi Eyes*, of the same era, also signifies consternation at the transformations in the modes of dress and aesthetic choices by “badmen” or shottas¹³:

*Mi nuh know how dem man yah fi talk bout dem a run di place an how
dem a badman
A bleach dem face an a cream dem hair an inna tight pants
Burn out dem bombo claat!*

[I cannot understand how these men are able to state that they have control
over this place and that they are badmen]
[When they are bleaching their faces and processing/straightening their
hair and are wearing skintight pants]
[Burn out their bombo claat ¹⁴]

The repetitive stanzas express a generalized dismay about male skin bleaching
and other related themes which suggests the feminization of the dominant mode
of dancehall's heterosexual masculinity, the hardcore shotta or gunman:

*Mi caan believe some man wheh mi hear say ah men
Mi caan believe say tight pants come in again
Mi caan believe say gunman an battyman a fren
Mi caan believe mi eyes, mi caan believe mi eyes
Mi caan believe di shotta dem a bleach out dem face*

[I cannot believe the identity of some men whom I hear are homosexual]
[I cannot believe that tight pants have made a comeback]
[I cannot believe that gunmen are friends with male homosexuals]
[I cannot believe my eyes, I cannot believe my eyes]
[I cannot believe that shottas/gunmen are bleaching out their faces]

This trend continued into the first decade of the new millennium with the
Gully Gad (God of the Gully), Mavado, in his 2008 treatise, *Nuh Bleach Wid
Cream* documenting the realities of shottas¹⁴ whose slippery grasp on hardcore
heterosexual masculinity is identified by their propensity to bleach. Moving
beyond the tracing match with arch-rival Vybz Kartel in which he constantly
railed at Kartel's lack of male power because of the early strains of Kartel's
obvious altering of his epidermis¹⁵, Mavado documents his concern with the
crossing over of hardcore masculinity into the feminized arena of bleaching in
violent and derogatory terms that relate to the themes in *Badman nuh Dress Like
Girl* and *Mi Caan Believe mi Eyes* of the previous decade:

*Mi nuh bleach wid cream, mi bleach wid mi M-16
Wid extra magazine, mi alone create mi crime scene*

*You a disgrace, bleaching yuh face
Tru yuh fuckin face yuh marrow drop*

*Yuh bleach wid cream, but mi bleach wid mi M-16
An mi nuh bleach wid team, mi alone step pon mi crime scene aaaay
Shotta nuh bleach wid cream, Wi bleach wid wi M-16*

[I don't use bleaching creams I use my M-16]
[With extra magazines, I create my crime scenes all by myself]
[You are a disgrace, bleaching your face]
[Through your fucking face your marrow falls]

[You use creams to bleach but I bleach with my M-16]
[And I do not bleach in a team, I step on my crime scene all alone aaaaay]
[Shottas do not use bleaching creams, we bleach with our M-16s]

Mavado's double-talk utilizes the Jamaican creole meaning of the verb "to bleach"¹⁶. First, it is the act of skin lightening where, according to Mavado, Shottas do not bleach with (skin) creams". Second, he suggests that real hardcore badmen, i.e. the shottas, endure the long hours of dark(ness) into (day)light with their weapons - without any visible physical deterioration¹⁷.

The lyrical responses of Rastafari-influenced music artistes to skin bleaching parallel that of the foregoing hardcore dancehall artistes from Harry Toddler's *Badman Nuh Dress like Girl*, through to Mavado's *Shotta Nuh Bleach Wid Cream*. At the same time these Rastafari-influenced interventions (e.g. I-Wayne's *Bleacher*, 2005 and Queen Ifrica's *Mi Nah Rub*, 2007) simultaneously encode the socially accepted definitions of bleachers as mentally unstable, Eurocentric traitors to their race and colour, and social deviants and outcasts. For artistes like Queen Ifrica and I-Wayne, the practice of skin bleaching is often defined as an outright rejection of an African identity and a descent into mindless Eurocentrism. In *Bleacher*, I-Wayne chastises those condemned by their consistent dipping into bleaching creams, and draws on the incendiary politics of Rastafari using fiery motifs to "burn" the bleachers and their unnatural practices. Queen Ifrica's *Mi Nah Rub* also forcefully rejects the behavior and practice of bleaching and uses the term "rub" to implicate the process of bleaching where creams and various potions are vigorously rubbed into the skin.¹⁸

Despite the foregoing protestations and exhortations from hardcore dancehall and Rastafari-influenced artistes, the practice of skin bleaching has taken centrestage as an accepted and preferred rite of passage into the halls of the fabulous, celebrated and controversial. This is documented in the lyrical treatises emanating from artistes like Lisa Hype, former member of Vybz Kartel's Portmore Empire, and Vybz Kartel, dancehall's most popular artiste, at the time of writing this paper.

Kartelography and Cake Soap

The current promotion of skin bleaching as a positive activity for both women and men is explicitly stated in dancehall treatises like Lisa Hyper's *Proud ah mi Bleaching* and *Bleaching Fit Mi*. This theme is also centralized in Vybz Kartel's controversial phrase "Cool, like mi wash mi face with the Cake Soap" in his songs *Straight Jeans and Fitted* and *Cake Soap*, as well as his continued flaunting of Cake Soap and skin bleaching in *Look Pon We*. In *Proud ah mi Bleaching*, Lisa Hype (now Lisa Hyper) affirms and claims skin bleaching as a positive activity - from an active, female perspective:

Chorus

*I am beautiful in every single way
Words can't bring me down
Ah Lisa Hype
I am beautiful no matter what they say
Words can't bring me down*

Verse 1

*Hey,
Mi proud ah mi bleaching cause mi cream it dere
Mi nah hide, rub on my Doctor Clear
Look how mi face it pretty have bear man ah stare
Mix di Neprosone wid Immediate Clear*

*If yuh foot fassy fassy use Maxi Light
Yuh cyan wear shorts ah day
Yuh cyan wear shorts ah night
Ah bleaching make Kim get Mr. Right
Cause when night come she use Fair an White
Dis ah fi gyal where deh ah dance at night*

*As six o'clock dem ah hide from sunlight
Mix Clove 8 and buy yuh Clear Right
By two weeks say yuh skin brown and white*

Verse 2

*Some gyal whey ah bleach an nah reach
And some whey ah do it and say dem nah do it
Mi know all bleaching tricks in di streets
Mi ah bleaching pro, my girl you nuh see it
Portmore girls have di Aloederm cream lock
Brooklyn girls have di Extreme like dat
Phat farm gyirls waan white by Christmas
Dem say it easy fi do, dem have di money like dat*

Verse 1

Hey

[I am proud of my bleaching because my (bleaching) cream is expensive]
[I will not hide and rub on my Doctor Clear]
[Look at how pretty my face is, (it) has many men staring]
[Mix the Neprozone with Immediate Clear]
[If your legs are covered with scars, use Maxi Light]
[You can wear shorts in the daylight]
[You can wear shorts at night]
[Bleaching is the reason why Kim got Mr. Right]
[Because she uses Fair and White at night]
[This is for the girls who are at a dance in the night]
[But who have to hide from the sunlight at 6am]
[Mix Clove 8 and buy your Clear Right]
[In two weeks your skin will be brown and white]

Verse 2

[Some girls who are bleaching and cannot get lighter]
[And others who are doing it but are saying they are not]
[I know all the bleaching tricks in streets]
[I am a bleaching pro, my girls don't you realize it?]
[Portmore girls have full control over the Aloederm cream]
[(And) Brooklyn girls have the Extreme (cream) in the same fashion]
[Phat Farm girls want to be white by Christmas]
[They say it is easy to accomplish because they have the money just like that]

Here, Lisa Hype, a naturally lighter skinned woman, first declares that she is beautiful in the Intro and Chorus of the song, and then publicly affirms and claims the practice of skin bleaching. In a song obviously aimed at women, she highlights herself as a “*bleaching pro*”, someone who “*know all di bleaching tricks in the streets*”, and so provides skin bleaching directions and recipes that can counteract dermatological problems for other women – “*if yuh foot fassy fassy use Maxi Light*” so that “*Yuh cyan wear shorts ah day, Yuh cyan wear shorts ah night*”. As such, she documents several popular skin bleaching products that she believes are important in the process including “*Doctor Clear, Immediate Clear, Maxi Light, Neprozone, Aloederm and Extreme*”. In addition, Lisa Hype highlights the reach of skin bleaching networks stretching from Portmore in Jamaica to Brooklyn in the USA. Her follow-up tune, *Bleaching Fit Me* (2009), expresses similar themes and rejects any suggestion that skin bleaching may result in medical problems like skin cancer. Lisa Hype’s affirmation of her engagement in skin bleaching and her explicit directives towards other women, sparked discussion and some condemnation in Jamaica and presaged the entry of Vybz Kartel into the Cake Soap/skin bleaching debates.

Vybz Kartel’s explosive entry into the forefront of dancehall has been characterized by immense controversy since his violent physical confrontation with Ninja Man at Sting 2003. Subsequently, he has maintained a central positioning as a figure heralded by conflict, controversy and transgression. As such, Kartel’s entry into the skin bleaching debate via his epidermal transformation, and his updated dalliance with the term cake soap in his lyrics and music video has fuelled an intense discussion on skin bleaching and the use of cake soap as a skin lightener in Jamaica. In the summer of 2010, in the initial discussion of cake soap in Verse 1 of his song *Straight Jeans and Fitted* (feat. Russian), Kartel explicitly introduces the line “*Cool like mi wash mi face wid di cake soap,*” thus:

Verse 1

*In case yuh neva know
 mi style fresh like di rose fa-di-mo
 from ceiling to floor, from head to mi toe
 from mi a canerow till mi hair low
 Gyal dem a watch we like ah stage show
 And a seh teacha, how yuh stay so?
 Cool, like mi wash mi face wid di cake soap
 Cool, like mi wash mi face wid di cake soap*

[Just in case you did not know]
[My style is as fresh as the rose from the morn]
[From ceiling to floor, from my head to my toes]
[From the time I have been wearing my hair in cornrows until my hair is cut low]
[The girls are watching us as if we are on a stage show]
[And they are asking “Teacher”, how/why are you like this?]
[(I am) Cool, as if I wash my face with (the) cake soap]
[I am) Cool, as if I wash my face with (the) cake soap]

The subsequent release of an accompanying music video for *Straight Jeans and Fitted* depicting Vybz Kartel making rubbing motions (associated with skin bleaching) across his face at the juncture where he states “*Cool like mi wash mi face wid di cake soap,*” coupled with his obvious epidermal transformation to a much lighter skin colour, sparked intense controversy about Kartel’s exhortations towards skin bleaching. Kartel responded with a song titled *Cake Soap* that uses the controversial line from the song *Straight Jeans and Fitted* as its repetitive hook and chorus thus:

Chorus

Cool like mi wash mi face wit di cake soap
Cool like mi wash mi face wit di cake soap

Repeat

[(I am) cool as if I use cake soap to wash my face]
[(I am) cool as if I use cake soap to wash my face]

In addition, Kartel references discussions about the state of his skin as positive in the line “*she seh Teacha*¹⁹ *you skin feel nice eeh*”.

Verse 1:

Mi no love man, so tek yo eye off a mi
A fi yo same gyal a try off a mi
Dem a fight fi di sweat whe a fly off a mi
An a drink Street Vybz so she high off a mi
Mi tan up inna di dance gyal a wine off a mi
She seh mi have di remedy fi be her daddy
Mi no use Viagra mi no buy horse tonic
She seh tell mi di remedy yo apply Addi

Verse 2

Hear mi nuh

Gyal from every area Me dem waan fi tear it up

How di gyal dem luv mi so Ahwhoah

Inna my inna my inna my scheme

Di gyal dem a seh mi a dem icecream

Straight jeans and fitted and white Tsss

She seh Teacha yo skin feel nice een

Verse 1

[I do not love men so take your eyes off me]

[It is your girlfriend who is trying to get involved with me]

[They are fighting over the sweat that comes off me]

[And are drinking Street Vybz (rum) so they are getting a high off me]

[I am standing in the dance and girls are wining/rubbing against me]

[She says I have the remedy to be her Daddy (sex partner)]

[I do not use Viagra and I do not use horse tonic]

[She says, tell me the remedy that you apply Addi]

Verse 2

[Hear me now]

[Girls from every area want me to give them hardcore sex]

[Why do the women love me so much? Awhoah]

[In my housing scheme (community)]

[The girls say I am their ice cream]

[(with) Straight jeans and fitted and white T-shirts]

[She says, Teacher, your skin feels nice eh?]

Since Kartel explicitly transgresses into what has been historically identified as feminine territory, *Cake Soap* contains multiple references to his desirability to the female as well as his virility as a man including the statement that he does not depend on enhancements like “*Viagra and horse tonic*”. In addition, he explicitly rejects male homosexuality with the statement “*Mi nuh love man so tek you yeye offa mi*”. In so doing, Kartel ensures that his identity as a virile, sexually potent, heterosexual and non-feminized male is intact even with his incursions into the feminized skin bleaching/Cake Soap territory.

One should note at this juncture that, despite Kartel’s apparent ownership of the cake soap debate, the use and value of cake soap as a component of Jamaican cultural and aesthetic practice predated Kartel’s superstar status, his

entry to dancehall and even his year of birth. I was introduced to the apparent dermatological wonders of cake soap as a teenager at high school in the late 1970s/early 1980s. For many working class and inner city individuals, the cheap and easily accessible cake soap was more than just laundry soap, but also a dermatological wonder with the capacity to reduce the dreaded “shine and greasy” or “tarry” look, leaving your face “cool” and free of pimples. Later, in the early 1980s myths other magical properties of cake soap abounded (along with the mythologized chemical, Alum) where, for women, the regular washing of certain body parts in warm water and cake soap (as well as Alum) could tighten the loosest of apertures in line with Frisco Kid’s (renamed Ancient Monarchy) exhortation in his 1990s treatise *Little and Cute* that “*It’s all about who have di gum, good body girls nah use no Alum*”.²⁰ The then colourless (yellow?) cake soap was deemed a magical substance that could lighten and tighten depending on your pleasure. Here, current assertions by Kartel’s that the blue version of “cake soap” (often referred to by the name of the popular Blue Bomber brand) is his cosmetic of choice, backed by the appropriate dancehall lyrics, is brokered on this culturally approved, and at least three decades old, relationship with cake soap by ordinary Jamaicans.²¹

Yet, even without direct admission of skin bleaching (as in the Lisa Hype example), Kartel’s signature line “*Cool, like mi wash mi face wid di cake soap*”, his accompanying tell-tale rubbing motions in the music video for *Straight Jeans and Fitted* and dalliance with references to skin bleaching, skin colour and cake soap in subsequent songs are seen as confirmation. This is particularly so when linked to his obvious epidermal transformation from a dark skinned to a very light-skinned man, and his joking comment in several interviews that this transformation is due to the use of air-conditioning and avoidance of sunlight. Kartel’s consistent transgressive engagement with explicit discussions around his cosmetic choices on various television and alternative discussion (e.g. interviews on the popular local television program *Entertainment Report* and online at Vibe.com) has raised immense ire in the media and amongst social agenda setters, as well as in the dancehall (e.g. Kiprich’s *Cake Soap/Caah Get Brown*).²² Kartel’s release of *Look Pon We* (featuring Russian) in January 2011, continues to promote controversial engagement with skin bleaching, thus:

Intro

(Uheh Uheh!!) Tell dem doh thief dah laugh deh

Russian, We nuh love man (Kartel)

Uptown Seh if a nuh Eve an Adam, We doh give a damn (Russian)

Awoah

Chorus

*From di gyal dem look pon me
Dem tell me dem love me
Girl come kiss come hug me
All when some boy hate me
Dem gyal wah date me
Di gyal dem love off mi brown cute face (Russian)
Di gyal dem love off mi bleach out face (Kartel)
(Uheh Uheh!!)
Dog u nuh play Ennuh (Russian)
Mi nuh response fi man, mi nuh gay Ennuh (Kartel)*

Verse 1

*Yu nuh like mi but yu gyal seh mi a di bunna man
She seh yu cyah do it good yu fi run along
Plus yu mom an yu auntie yu sister an all a yu female cousin dem come
along
Him inna di benz an me inna di hummer van
Gyal a ask if mi a American citizen
An she tell mi fi dash weh di condom because she tell mi she wah get a
pretty son (Russian)
Everywhere we going, gyal dem hitch up pon we
Gyal weh pretty so,
Gyal weh fava duppy story
Nuff boy seh dem hate me
But dem haffi rate mi
Cause dem wah fi be a gyallis like me*

Verse 2

*Gyal a gamble, Ask john watson
Gyal dem wid dem body inna di benz annuh datson
Gaza dem wah spin dem like a axil
Gyal dem seh Russian fava Anglo Saxon (Russian)
Me, Michael "cake soap" Jackson (Kartel)
Gyal a bawl ramson an cancel dem tonsil.
Fi me Russian Tarik Johnston
Gyal seh mi smoother than Johnson and Johnson (Russian)*

Intro

[Uheh Uheh! Tell them do not steal that laugh]
[Russian, we do not love men (Kartel)]
[Uptown says, if it is not Eve and Adam, we do not give a damn
(Russian)]

Chorus

[Once the girls look at me]
[They tell me that they love me]
[The girls come and kiss and hug me]
[Even when some boys (out there) hate me]
[Their girlfriends want to start dating me]
[The girls love my brown and cute face (Russian)]
[The girls love my bleached out face Uheh, Uheh (Kartel)]
[Dog, you do not play around you know (Russian)]
[I don't care about other men, I am not gay you know (Kartel)]

Verse 1

[You do not like me but your girlfriend says I am the man who she
cheats on you with]
[She says you cannot perform well sexually so you should run along]
[Plus, your mother and your sister and all your female cousins have come
along]
[He is in the Benz and I am in the Hummer van]
[The girl is asking if I am an American citizen]
[And she told me to throw away the condom because she wants me
to father a pretty son (with her)]

[Everywhere we go,]
[Girls are sticking close to us]
[Girls who are so pretty]
[Girls who resemble (something from) a ghost story]
[A lot of men claim that they hate me]
[But they have to give me a lot of respect]
[Because they want to be a man with lots of women, just like me]

Verse 2

[Girls are gambling, just ask John Watson]
[Girls with their bodies in the Benz, it is not a Datsun]
[They want (men from) the Gaza to spin them as if they are on an axle]

[The girls say that Russian resembles an Anglo Saxon]
[And me, (I resemble) Michael Cake Soap Jackson (Kartel)]
[The girls are crying out ramson and have cancelled their tonsils]
[For me, Russian Tarik Johnson]
[The girls say that I am smoother than Johnson and Johnson (baby oil)]

In *Look Pon We*, Kartel (aided by Russian) explicitly highlights several controversial planks in the debates on skin bleaching and repeats several distinct themes in *Cake Soap* when he highlights himself as extremely desirable to women, who love (off) his “bleach out face”. As such, he ensures that he remains a true “gallis”²³ (and de-linked from the feminized and near-homosexual accusations that are often leveled against men who bleach their skin) with consistent references to females’ desire for intimate encounters with him and rejection of male homosexuality (*wi nuh love man/mi nuh gay ennuh*). Russian, a naturally lighter skinned man, also highlights the popular desire for lighter skinned, “pretty” offspring by many women, noting “*An she tell mi fi dash weh di condom because she tell mi she wah get a pretty son*”. In addition, Kartel foregrounds another metaphor popularly used in Jamaica to denote individuals who engage in skin bleaching practices when he calls himself into being as “Michael Cake Soap Jackson.”

While not attracting the same social condemnation and ire as Kartel’s subsequent foray in the discussion, Lisa Hype’s explicit claiming and naming of her skin bleaching as positive and acceptable is married to the same ethos – the aggressive battle and claims for space, legitimacy and visibility of once-denied individuals. These claims are paralleled by the explosion of ungendered rites of fashion and style where men and women proudly display their fashioned and styled bodies as beautiful and fabulous, complete with bleached skin. This public display and explicit confirmation of skin bleaching as a personal and positive choice, particularly by men, ruptures Jamaica’s traditional sensibilities that have socially and culturally delegitimized skin bleachers as feminized, infantilized and mindless individuals, devoid of self-esteem, Afrocentrism and a modicum of sense. Arguably, Kartel’s explicit lyrical and behavioural foray into the skin bleaching debate is a deliberate move to attract and maintain the high levels of social, cultural and media attention that controversies of this nature generate. In this, Kartel has enjoyed mega-success that has boosted his visibility as a dancehall artiste, even while the historical and cultural imperatives towards lighter skin remain intact.

Conclusion

From Buju's desire for a "Browning" to Kartel's Cake Soap fetish, contemporary modes of skin bleaching incorporate remnants of the patent Eurocentrism of an earlier era that underpin the current ideas of aestheticization as a transformative space that reverses the social hierarchies of magnificence and beauty in Jamaica. Vybzs Kartel's extreme posturing and defiant lyrical stance two decades later, in the center of the Cake Soap/skin bleaching controversy, suggests that this practice has emerged from the metaphoric closet and is now figured publicly and openly as an ungendered, aesthetic rite of a fashioned and styled personhood in Jamaica. Arguably, skin bleaching joins the range of body technologies that refashions towards an idolized ideal. In this era bleachers actively declare their agency by choosing to access the vestiges of social visibility that this aesthetic process bestows, including the massive amounts of publicity generated by controversy.

The current debates highlights the parallels between skin bleaching, as a method of altering the shade of one's epidermis for black people, and skin tanning, also a method of altering the shade of one's epidermis, for whites. While the parallels exist, the fixity of white race privilege and the centuries-old systems of white supremacy means that a tanned or darkened Caucasian never 'becomes' black as he/she cannot transcend the immutability and corresponding privilege of his/her racial identity since, in societies where race is the predominant social ranking factor and whiteness acts as the dominant aesthetic ideal, there is no loss of prestige (Dyer, 1997). In Jamaica's rigid class/colour/race framework, where the idealized category 'brown' is shadowed by the white supremacist race prestige of Eurocentrism, and thus linked to lighter skin colour and social class and prestige, the contrary is also true. "Brownness" as an identity cannot be acquired by artifice – e.g. the use of skin bleaching creams and potions, hair straighteners or additions of false hair – and any claims to this undermine the local understanding that hitherto linked "brown" raciality with the natural, biological markers of ancestry and blood" (Barnes, 2006:113).

Thus, in the final analysis, even while Jamaican working class and darker-skinned aspirants for social mobility may utilize various forms of artifice, a "pharmacy Browning"²⁴ cannot gain the same level of social prestige and acceptance across class/colour/race lines as a true "brown" individual. As such, hegemonic debates which insist that the obsession with the Browning" or Cake Soap is based on the belief that they can magically transform dark-skinned

members of Jamaica's underclasses into powerful "brown" Jamaicans, with all the attendant social and cultural privilege, and prestige are flawed or outright lies. I argue that these hegemonic debates operate only to distract members of Jamaica's underclasses from the true meaning of their oppression and the lack of real strategies that would facilitate their social and cultural mobility.

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Notes

¹ This paper is an updated version of an article titled "Fashion Ova Style: Contemporary Notions of Skin Bleaching in Jamaican Dancehall Culture" that previously appeared in *JENdA: A Journal of African Culture and African Women Studies*, No. 14, 2009, pp. 101-126.

² To look "cool" in this instance is to have skin that is (i) free from blemishes, (ii) not greasy (iii) not darkened by over-exposure to the sun. These three epidermal facets are usually associated with manual labour and/or poverty. This is a recurrent theme in popular and dancehall discussions with lighter skin and skin bleaching.

³ In 1999 and again in 2002 the Ministry of Health in Jamaica released a list of banned beauty products and seized several creams including Movate, Reggae Lemon Gel, Top Gel Plus, Omic Gel Plus, Lemonvate Cream, Tropesone Gel, Tropesone Gel Plus, Neoprosone and Pro-Beta Zone. However, socially accepted skin lighteners that are dispensed in "accepted" dosages by registered dermatologists including Retin-A (tretinoin) and various forms of hydroquinone in approved percentages are not considered "harmful" and so do not appear on this list.

⁴ In ordinary Jamaican dialogue, the terms "Brown man" and "Brown woman" encapsulates a dilute reference to skin colour and a broader reference to the high levels of status accorded to the social and economic category in which individuals thus identified were positioned, particularly in the postcolonial era. Many "Brown men" and "Brown women" were and are large landholders and/or involved in various forms of private commercial activity.

⁵ The crowning of a Rastafarian woman as Miss Jamaica Universe 2007 raised many questions and a great deal of controversy in Jamaica. The notion of Rastafarian femininity as private, covered, and clothed was ripped apart and transformed into a public, unclothed spectacle. Many Rastafarians were angered at this. Nonetheless, many Jamaicans were ecstatic to see a dark-skinned, 'natural' beauty win this contest, while others felt it was a publicity stunt.

⁶ Some of the skin lightening methods used include personal concoctions of curry powder, toothpaste, bleaching powders, household bleach. See Note 3 above for others identified as harmful in state-driven public education campaigns.

⁷ This was prior to Buju Banton's conversion to the Rastafari faith. It is also important to note that Love Mi Browning was written by ace songwriter, Dave Kelly, to be sung by Tony Rebel, a Rastafarian artiste. Tony Rebel's refusal to sing this song resulted in a relatively unknown, very young and 'baldhead' (or non-Rastafari) Buju Banton agreeing to do the song. This act propelled Buju into instant notoriety and stardom in dancehall culture.

⁸ See Hope 2009 for an in-depth discussion on *Love Black Woman*.

⁹ Popular debates about skin bleaching in Jamaica today utilize Buju Banton's *Love Mi Browning* as a referent point with Nardo Ranks' *Dem Bleach* acting in a secondary, supportive category.

¹⁰ This has become one popular rebuttal to admonitions about and a strident justification for skin bleaching. Many Jamaicans who lighten their skin claim that are at liberty to use products acquired with their own resources and since the epidermis in question is their personal property, they are also at liberty to alter its shade, regardless of any dangers, real or imagined.

¹¹ As noted earlier, *Bleach On* did not make the airwaves or become a hit in the underground dancehall, yet, as one of dancehall's treatises, it exists as a radical strand of the discursive pathways on which the debates on skin bleaching in dancehall culture is uplifted.

¹² The Scare Dem Crew was a very popular dancehall group in the late 1990s that was under the management of Sharon Burke's Solid Agency. Its members were Elephant Man, Harry Toddler, Nitty Kutchie and Boom Dandimite. The Crew eventually split at the end of the 1990s and members went their separate ways.

¹³ The literal translation of shottas is shooters. The term refers to gunmen or "real badmen" who epitomize the type of violent heterosexual masculinity that is lauded in dancehall.

¹⁴ Bumbo claat or Bumbo cloth is a Jamaican expletive.

¹⁵ For example in Mavado's song *Mr. Palmer*.

¹⁶ "To bleach" in Jamaican creole means to stay awake all night without sleep until day lights, i.e. from darkness to light. It is often associated with staying out at parties, dances, wakes or similar events. Thus, people who work night shifts will not usually say that they "bleach" but someone who attended a party or a wake will claim to have "bleached" all night. A good "bleacher" is someone who can stay up all night and then conduct their regular daylight duties at work or school without any visible effects of having missed a night's sleep.

¹⁷ Dancehall's daily calendar incorporates ample opportunities for this type alternative notion of "bleaching" as regular activities usually get underway close to midnight and taper off after daybreak, oftentimes close to eight am.

¹⁸ See Hope 2009 for a more in-depth examination of the Rastafari-influenced treatises on skin bleaching. See also Tafari Ama 2008 and Niaah 2009 for a Rastafari overview and discussion of the issue of skin bleaching.

¹⁹ Teacha or Teacher is a self-referent for Vybz Kartel (Adidja Palmer) who also uses the moniker Addi di Teacher or Adidja the Teacher.

²⁰ Alum was said to be easily available in block form from popular drugstores like March's Drugstore in downtown Kingston. Potassium Alum, which is the form commonly available for commerce is also noted as having cosmetic applications, including use as a blood coagulant, a base in skin whiteners and in depilatory waxes for the use of body hair.

²¹ In late 2010 Vybz Kartel upped the ante on this debate with the announcement that he would subsequently release of his own line of blue cake soap.

²² The term "cake soap" has become synonymous with the current wave of skin bleaching by many Jamaicans, particularly fans and not-so-fans of dancehall. Blue (Bomber) cake soap made multiple appearances in several acts at Sting 2010 to the wild laughter, cheers and general hype frenzy of the audience. This included the throwing of cake soap in several acts and Kiprich's flashy unveiling of an entire case of cake soap along with tracings, mentions and general lyrics about bleaching, browning, and related variations on the Kartel theme, that kept dancehall's absent DJ present and accounted for at Sting 2010.

²³ A gallis or gyallis is a man who is involved intimate relations with many women.

²⁴ A "pharmacy Browning" is an individual who utilizes pharmaceuticals or chemicals to acquire a lighter complexion, i.e. a bleacher.

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